

October 7, 2008

The Boston Globe

GLOBE EDITORIAL

The facts of strife

October 7, 2008

IF THE UNITED STATES has learned anything from its long, inconclusive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it's that military power alone isn't enough. Many Iraqis lost faith in the US mission five years ago, when they saw American forces fail to restore electricity, water, law and order, and other services after toppling Saddam Hussein from power.

But with help from civilian specialists, military units can stabilize strife-torn areas. Now the State Department has taken on the task of mobilizing a corps of civilians from inside and outside the federal government who can quickly assist in restoring order in crisis situations. This initiative deserves the support of the next president.

President Bush has at last recognized that the United States must sometimes take non-military steps, often with foreign partners, to prevent anarchic areas from degenerating into centers of terrorism, genocide, or arms-trafficking.

This is a major turnaround for a president who once disdained attempts at nation-building - or "sustainable stability," as John Herbst, head of the State Department office organizing the nascent Civilian Response Corps, prefers to call it.

The corps embodies what Defense Secretary Robert Gates has often stated: The military alone cannot achieve the goals of US policy in places as different as Haiti and Afghanistan. It will bring together representatives from eight federal departments and agencies, from justice to agriculture and commerce. Herbst envisions it including engineers, lawyers, judges, public health specialists, city planners, and port operators.

The first responders, on the ground within two to five days of a crisis, will be 250 fulltime State Department employees. Backing them up will be 2,000 federal government officials who will be trained for stabilization missions and deployable within 30 to 45 days. There will be another 2,000 trained corps members in a reserve component from the private sector or state or local governments. They will be deployed within 45 to 90 days. In some cases, the corps will follow US military action; in others, corps stabilization efforts will prevent armed conflict in the first place.

At the formal launching of the corps in July, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said, "It is clear that managing the problems of state failure and ungoverned spaces will be a feature of US foreign policy for the foreseeable future - whether we like it or not." The Civilian Response Corps provides a president with an effective means of bringing a full range of US know-how to the globe's "ungoverned spaces." Congress and the next president should give it the funding it needs.

© Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company